



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural
Resources
Conservation Service

Resource Economics
and Social Sciences
Division

May 2001

Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories

Cool's Pond—Fee Fishing, Farm Stand, and Crafts

Interview with Sam and Barbara Cool, 14425 Edgemount,
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What is the history of your farm and farming experience?

This farm has been in Sam's family since 1878. There were 102 acres in orchards and raspberries for many years. Now, the farm is 70 acres—40 acres in orchards and 30 in woodland. Sam grew up on the farm and joined the Air Force at the age of 18. He moved back to the farm in 1975 after 10 years in the Air Force. At that time, his Dad and Mom raised several different fruits and berries. Today, we have peaches, apples, raspberries—and the fish.

Describe the alternative enterprises in which you are presently engaged.

We have two catch-and-release, fee-fishing ponds. We rent fishing rods and sell bait, sodas, candy bars, and other prepackaged foods. Three years ago we started tent camping for groups who want to fish all night. At this time, groups—seniors, YMCA, church, special education—started to come, and we prepare barbeque lunches and dinners for them.

We also make wooden miniature replicas of people's homes, artfully scaled and hand painted in detail. This year, our newest venture has been to duplicate homes as birdhouses. See us at cool-homes.com. In June, we will advertise in *Country Sampler* magazine. These crafts have proved to be unique gifts and cherished keepsakes. We have shipped this work all over the country.

What made you decide to go into the present alternative enterprises? What were your goals and vision?

We were forced into developing another source of income after our crop was frozen out. We looked at ways to make the resources on the farm bring in additional income. Sam's father had put in an acre pond in the 1950's with Soil Conservation Service (now Natural Resources Conservation Service) assistance. The pond is 15 feet deep and clear, and it is fed year-round by a 55-degree spring. It has never gone dry. The pond's main purpose was to provide irrigation water during drought. The cold water is perfect for trout.

How did you make the transition?

We did our production research—reading magazines and research reports, talking to other aquaculture entrepreneurs, etc. We got a lot of technical assistance help from the University of Maryland and their alternative enterprise Extension agent. We decided to raise catfish, trout, and bass and added local bluegills and crappies. As the business grew, we added another half-acre pond above the older pond.

We also added the open-air market and enclosed the roadside stand. We sell in-season fruits, berries, vegetables, crafts, eggs, milk, and baked goods. We use this store for renting rods and selling baits and sodas and prepackaged snacks. Some people asked if they could tent camp, and now we have campers during the summer. We use an honor system at the pond to collect fees. People who come and fish at the pond simply drop their money through the slot of a lock box. We have come home after a 3-day weekend to as much as \$200, even though a lot of people

misread the "fee fishing" sign for "free fishing." Groups started to come and Sam likes to barbeque, so we have provided this service on several occasions.

We did not have a business plan. We would think about an idea and discuss it over breakfast. Then, we would go ahead and test the idea. We did a little bit at a time—take small steps so if something went wrong we would be able to pay for it with side jobs or withstand the financial cost using the other enterprises without jeopardizing the farm. We still use the same decision process today.

We did essentially all of our own financing. If we did not have the money, we did not do it or we did it for less. We had a couple of bad crop years and developed the craft business in order to survive on the farm. It works out great because most of the craft business is during the winter when farm chores are at a minimum.

How did you market your products?

We started out by advertising in the local paper thinking we would be overrun by people on the first day. Not a single person came. We have found the "Cool's Fishing Pond" sign and word of mouth are our best advertisers. We spend about \$200 a year on a classified ad in our local newspaper. We developed a brochure and placed it in the visitor centers along the Interstate.

If we want to open a new market, we talk to the group. This is much more effective than writing a letter or putting an article in the paper. Taking pictures of people fishing and sending them to the newspaper is the best free advertisement. Local newspapers are always looking for stories about people.

How do you price your products?

We just look at our costs and then set a price that will turn a profit. For example, we started fee fishing at \$3.00, but we were losing money at that price so we quickly increased it to our current rate of \$5.00. Now, we charge \$5.00 whether you fish all day or for 20 minutes. We charge children and adults the same fee. We rent rods for \$2.50 and sell bait at \$2.50 a container. We sell frozen 9-inch fresh berry pies for \$6.50. We list Cool-Home products on our Website, www.cool-homes.com.

What went wrong? And Why? How did you correct the situation?

Our first idea was to raise caged trout for the wholesale restaurant market. But we found that we raised enough fish for only about a one-month supply. So, we let the trout out of the cages and put up a sign that said "fee fishing." Our business has been growing ever since. When we first started, we charged a modest fee to fish and a separate fee for each fish caught. Soon, we found out that too many fish were being caught too quickly. We were being fished out. So, the business quickly became catch-and-release fishing. People could still keep fish, but now we charge \$5 for every fish kept.

What went right? And Why? How did you build on your success?

The fishing enterprise has saved the farm financially several times over the past 15 years due to crop failures, low prices and droughts. People love to be outdoors. We have a beautiful view of a rural farming valley. People love the peace and quiet. They love to see their children catch fish or enjoy catching fish themselves.

I purchased my trout rather than obtaining them from the state fisheries. I have a Maryland "fee fishing" license. This eliminates the problem of having a fishing license to fish at my pond. In Maryland, any State stocked fishing requires an angler to have a license before he or she can fish.

What would you have done differently?

Nothing!

Where do you plan to go from here?

In the past two years, we have gone into the craft business. We use our Web site to market our crafts, and we ship them all over the country. This has made up for the bad years. It is hard to make a good living on a farm our size without these alternative enterprises. They have carried the farm. We hate to say it but the small family farm is going to be a thing of the past.

What would be the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?

- Don't put pressure on people. Give them freedom to fish. Be helpful but not judgmental. Help them make the most of their experience. Help them feel welcome.
- Remember: Your customers are your guests.
- Do your research. Contact the NRCS, Extension, state university system. Talk to others, and go to seminars.
- Be realistic. Ask how this enterprise fits into the family goals. What are the start-up costs? What are the labor requirements?
- Build and learn. You will never develop the perfect plan. Don't grow too fast.
- Maintain the water and the grounds to keep them neat and clean.
- Keep good records and use them to determine what does and does not work.
- Use a guest book to get names for mailings.
- Have a good source of water if you are raising fish.

How did you handle the liability concern?

We have a \$1 million liability policy on the farm. It covers the pond because aquaculture is considered a part of agriculture for insurance purposes. The insurance is very low cost.

Do you mind sharing your promotional material? (Including your prices.)

We tag some fish. Anglers who catch a tagged fish can claim a prize (\$10-25, or fishing equipment). This has really stimulated interest.

Would it be ok for people to contact you?
Yes!

What do you dislike the most and like the most?

Our favorite part is meeting the people. It's something to see the little kids come in and catch their first fish. Some people who came when they were kids themselves are now bringing their own kids back to learn to fish.

We dislike the difficulty of working with the state and county governments. They are not very supportive of helping farmers implement non-agricultural businesses on their farm. We tried to put up rustic cabins but forgot the idea after seeing all the county requirements. State and county requirements were inconsistent.

Would you start this alternative enterprise business today after learning what is involved?

We farm by choice. But in today's world, our farm is pretty small. Doing what we've done with the pond, crafts, and store has helped us keep the farm. We are having a great time. It gets hectic at times but it is very rewarding!

Do you want additional information? For more success stories and other information, see the website:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/>

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